



## Information and communication technology [ICT] has not resolved the crisis of electoral integrity in Africa, it has digitized it

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### ABSTRACT

The push by international organizations and the donor community for the digitization of electoral systems in Africa has largely been framed within economic and normative rationalities both of which aim to improve transparency and efficiency in electoral governance, key instruments for electoral integrity. This paper focuses on the disjunction between the normative and economic promises of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) in electoral governance and the politics of their practical application in Africa. Employing Policy Diffusion Theory (PDT) and interpretive qualitative methodology, the study uses Kenya and Nigeria to make this assessment. This study finds that for all its promises, ICT reform in places such as Kenya and Nigeria tend, on the contrast, to perpetuate rather than alleviate electoral malpractice and institutional weakness. The paper reveals the complexities and pitfalls of ICT adoption in electoral governance and concludes that there is need for aligning technological reforms with local political, institutional, and socio-cultural contexts for genuine democratic transformation in African elections. The paper recommends a dire need for reclaiming African ownership of electoral reforms through grounding ICT adoption in local consultations, reducing dependence on electoral aid or funding elections independently, insulating ICT procurement from elite capture, building credible electoral institutions, and fostering intra-African regional peer learning.

**Keywords:** Africa, Economic Value, Electoral Governance, Electoral Integrity, Normative Value, Policy Diffusion

### I. INTRODUCTION

Global interest in the adoption of digital technologies in electoral governance has tremendously grown over the last two decades. Widely recognized as an integral component of “digital democracy” (Maseko, 2024; Gilardi, 2022; Chaobanpho et al., 2025), this phenomenon has led to an increasing expectation among international institutions, development agencies, and donor governments that the integration of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) in electoral systems will facilitate transparency, efficiency, and public confidence in democratic processes. Due her vulnerabilities in global political economy (Brown, 2013; Kasera et al., 2024; Kasera, 2025a; Kasera, 2025b), including a consistent perceived lack of capacity to fund every aspect of her electoral cycle, Africa has joined the bandwagon of ICT-based elections early comers in the West, seemingly without any critical reflections on what such policy diffusion portends for her real transformation.

From biometric voter enrollment to the electronic transmission of results, and real-time election observation platforms, these technologies have been implemented in a technology-driven utopia as neutral tools that can reduce human error, deter electoral manipulation, and improve political accountability. This technological transformation has been embedded and normalized through a framework of global and multilateral institutions. For one, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) has been engaged in promoting the utilization of ICTs in election processes across multiple low- and middle-income countries (UNDP, n.d; UNDP, 2012) as a developmental activity. In a number of its guides and handbooks, primarily the Electoral Assistance Implementation Guide and Handbook on Technology and Electoral Registration, the UNDP promotes the use of a wide range of ICTs, such as biometric registration kits, electronic transmission tools, and geo-mapping solutions as “promising practice” measures to advance integrity and optimize electoral operations (UNDP, 2012; 2017) and thereby achieve both national and human development. Similarly, and European Union Election Observation Mission post-election reports across Africa



regularly urge for greater implementation or scale up on ICTs to ‘attain international standards of electoral best practice (EU EOM, 2019).

To formalize the ICT elections attendant norms, the United Nations General Assembly Resolution A/RES/66/164 in “Strengthening the Role of the United Nations in Enhancing the Effectiveness of the Principle of Periodic and Genuine Elections”, passed in 2011 at the normative level implicitly endorse modernization of electoral processes through technology (UN, 2011). The resolution prescribes to develop Electoral systems that are “transparent, credible, inclusive, and accessible”, what are widely recognized in international policy language as core characteristics of ICT solutions (Manyasa, 2022). What is more, the Sustainable Development Goals, in particular, Goal 16 – Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions, explicitly endorses building accountable and transparent institutions; widely interpreted in development programming to necessarily imply the adoption of e-governance, including digital electoral reforms (United Nations [UN], 2015).

These global policy prescriptions are mirrored in the strategies of influential multilateral donors to the governance sector, such as the World Bank, and the International Foundation for Electoral Systems. The World Bank’s report titled Digital Dividends of January 2016 extensively outlines that digital platform are key to pulling public service delivery, including electoral services, towards greater efficiency in public spending (World Bank Group, 2016). Meanwhile, IFES repeatedly presents ICT adoption as a top priority approach in what it phrases as “electoral integrity programming”. IFES possesses a unit exclusively focused on electoral technology and cyber security, which collaborates with local electoral commissions in Africa and Asia, for instance, to introduce or boost the existing technological systems for voter verification and result transmission (IFES, 2020; Rodríguez-Pérez & Esteve, 2023a; Rodríguez-Pérez & Esteve, 2023b; Ogutu et al., 2023; INEC; 2019; 2022). IFES has been in Kenya and Nigeria as early as mid-1980s as early as it was formed, and has been the critical voice pushing “capacity building” narratives in the context of Kenya (Ogutu et al., 2023) and Nigeria (INEC, 2003; 2007; 2015).

Critically perceived, such adjective, often fueled by donor pressure, has seeped into the policies of regional and transnational entities like the African Union and the Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie, or OIF that have provided (for those in developed world) and received (for those in developing world) electoral support under the high-sounding language of digitization (Manyasa, 2022; Rodríguez-Pérez & Esteve, 2023b). For instance, the African Charter on Democracy, Elections, and Governance adopts one of the broadest definitions of desirable practice and therefore leaves an equally broad gap which foreign actors like the EU, United Nations (UN), UNDP, World Bank, International Foundations for Electoral Systems (IFES), etc., are only too eager to fill through digital intervention (AU, 2023). Consequently, policy transfer does not take place only through direct funding conditionalities but also in a more indirect form of norm internalization and soft coercion that relies on the African states’ performative signification to coerce compliant adoption of ICT systems as a sign of modernity and international acceptance (Dolowitz & Marsh, 2000).

To understand whether ICT-elections are useful for Africa or not, it is important to juxtapose its utility in Africa with other countries in the West. The adoption of ICT-elections in advanced democracies such as the United States, United Kingdom, Australia, and Canada is contextually enshrined within longstanding traditions of institutional stability, legal accountability, and public oversight. Unlike many cases in developing contexts, technology is not introduced as an antidote to the lack of trust and legitimacy but as a means to rationalize administrative processes or increase transparency and voter convenience. Thus, for instance, Canada’s E-Registration, online broadcasts of candidate presentations, and real-time results transmissions consistently coincided with the highest levels of electoral trust since 1998, with over 90% of voters in Elections Canada’s (2019) post-election survey claiming they were confident in the accuracy of vote counts. The U.S. similarly adopted such technologies as electronic poll books and ballot tracking systems with extensive auditing and cybersecurity protocols but under the guidance of its independent agency, the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA), which declared the 2020 presidential election “the most secure in American history (CISA, 2020).

In addition, citizens in these countries continue to exhibit relatively stout levels of trust in the electoral processes. Indeed, high public confidence is enhanced by the gradual and open implementation of the new technologies. For example, Australian Electoral Commission [AEC] (2022), the Australia’s electoral management body claims a high level of public confidence. The body’s statistics shows that there are over 76% of citizens who trust the integrity of elections following the 2022 federal elections. On occasions, symbolism such as voter turnout has been used to emphasize the nature of interaction and feelings on electoral democracy. For example, other countries such as Canada with a 67% voter turnout in 2019, the UK, which experienced 67.3 voter turnout in 2019, and Australia with a 90.24% voter turnout record due to compulsory voting in 2022 present a good picture of citizen engagement in democracy even in the digital era. Duenas-Cid et al. (2024) agrees with the views of Norris (2015) and Birch (2020) argue that in these contexts, ICT adoption is part of a larger cycle of electoral legitimacy, where strong institutions, civic education, and rule-of-law cultures enable technological tools to reinforce rather than undermine public trust s they possess independent funding commissions housing secure and well-resourced ICT departments,

counter-misinformation strategies, and regular public accountability reports on the performance of the tool in election facilitation. Importantly, ICT use in these advanced democracies' electoral systems has not involved top-down donor pressure or emulation of "best practice" buzzwords. In the cases of the UK, Canada, and Australia, for example, they did not adopt ICT solutions simply to mimic Western modernity or as conditionalities tied to development assistance. In many advanced countries, ICT use in elections took a slow, incremental processes involving a long and rigorous experimentation that considered many probabilities and possibilities. As Duenas-Cid et al. (2024) show in their comparative study of United States, Netherlands, Poland and Kenya, in the United States of America, for example, the Federal government leaves it to states and local governments to use and customize such technologies within their environments. Moreover, the decisions regarding ICT adoption at the local level are anchored on the competitive legislative process, with the bills receiving scrutiny from political parties and civic organizations on both sides of the divide (*Ibid*).

This paper examines that show that the African case paints a different and problematic picture. Most African states, notably Nigeria and Kenya, have introduced ICTs into their electoral systems but the transformative change talked about has not been anything but inconsistent with reality (Ojo, 2023a; Premium Times, 2023; Cheeseman et al, 2018). Through the cases of Kenya and Nigeria, this study reveals ICTs' gap to realize the attendant normative claims usually attached to it. To understand this disjuncture, the paper problematizes the burgeoning literature on governance in as it has not delineated how governance and ICT are interconnected, particularly within the election governance. The paper elucidates the significance of election governance as a prime governance subdomain examines the normative and economic grounds for an ICT-based election transformation in Africa and concludes with remarks on the empirical viability of such grounds in the African context. Kenya and Nigeria are used as case studies. To tie the loose ends, the paper links the prospects for ICT-based election reforms to the broader theoretical paradigm of policy diffusion as a lens to argue that in the African context, deploying ICT in the election is hardly about transforming local electoral problems but rather about conforming to the donor-prescribed notion of what an "electoral modernity" means as perpetuated by external actors, and coincidentally rationalized by electoral failures and crises.

The paper validates the perspective that on their own, ICT technologies cannot address the more structural and political dysfunctions that void the continent's electoral processes, such as elite capture, weak institutions, and identity-politics based electoral systems. ICT elections wave across Africa must therefore be viewed as part and parcel of neo-patrimonial politics rather than a normative solution as it currently framed.

### 1.1 Statement of the Problem

Even though digital technology has increasingly shaped digital governance in the electoral sphere globally, there is still a considerable discrepancy between the normative promise and political realities of ICT implementation in Africa. Far from providing additional credibility to elections and increasing public trust, the introduction of these technologies has all too frequently been met with technical failure, data manipulation and institutional ill-preparedness, and has tended to produce greater public cynicism and disputed results. This norm-reality failure is symptomatic of a deeper structural problem — namely, the belief that technical solutions can solve structural political problems. When it comes to electoral fraud, elite manipulation, and institutional weakness, rather than solving these problems, ICT reform in Africa often consolidates them, giving a digital gloss to a deeply compromised political process. The introduction of such systems so far has been a typical example of what we might call digital electoralism: a situation in which a veneer of modernisation camouflages persistent governance woes without delivering real democratic progress.

To account for this disjunction between technological innovation and democratic dividends, this paper enters the literature on African governance by drawing attention to one puzzling void within this literature: the thin scholarly engagement with the nexus of ICT and governance in Africa, and, more specifically, in the high-stakes arena of electoral governance. Though there is an expanding scholarship on the mechanics and operational dynamics of ICT in elections, much less work yet looks into how it works in the larger political and institutional tapestries of African states. This paper seeks to fill that gap by theorizing electoral governance not as just an administrative task but a contested politically terrain involving elite power interests, legitimacy battles, and international interventions. In particular, the article analyses normative and economic rationales for ICT-based electoral reform in Africa, and questions the pragmatic feasibility of such electoral reforms in countries like Kenya and Nigeria, where institutionalized dysfunction and politicized bureaucracies prevail. The study is guided with the following objectives:

1. To assess the relevance of the normative and economic justifications for ICT-based elections for Africa
2. To examine change and continuity in African elections post-ICT adoption
3. To provide recommendations for navigating the unfavorable politics in Africa that hinders ICT-elections from delivering its promises.



## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 Theoretical Review

#### 2.1.1 Policy Diffusion Theory

An insightful application of the Policy Diffusion Theory to the worldwide dissemination of ICTs in elections, especially in the African case is offered. Based as it is in comparative politics and international relations, this approach demonstrates how policy innovations cross borders not as products of internal experimentation or domestic demand but largely due to the effects of external pressure in the form of mimicry, normative persuasion, coercion, or the quest for global legitimation (Dolowitz & Marsh, 2000). Foreign influences and predominant global narratives on “free and fair elections” have significant impact on domestic governance decisions in Africa. Simmons et al. (2006) make the case that emulation, learning, competition, and coercion are important mechanisms of policy diffusion at the global level. Similarly Dolowitz and Marsh (2000) describe policy transfer as both voluntary (lesson-drawing, inspiration) and coercive (conditional aid, imposed reforms) and caution against the danger of reforms not being sufficiently accommodating to local context, and creating dysfunctional policy as a consequence.

Policy Diffusion Theory assumes a number of theoretical underpinnings. For, first, it reveals the role of external actors—multilateral agencies (UNDP/World Bank), bilateral donors, INGOs and transnational advocacy networks—in influencing national policy agendas through finance, technical support, and norm-setting. Second, it separates symbolic adoption from effective success, noting that more commonly does reform function to show actors’ conformance to global norms than to address actual problems in domestic society. Third, reform spreads by a combination of soft (persuasion, peer action) and hard (donor conditionality, international surveillance) channels. More importantly, the theory signals the well-documented tendency for imported reforms to be poorly synchronized with domestic institutional capacity.

In Africa, tension between these elements illuminates the swift but uneven adaptation to ICTs as a mode of electoral reform. From the perspective of this theory, nations such as Kenya and Nigeria can be seen as having implemented sophisticated electoral technologies—biometric voter registration, electronic results transmission, and biometric accreditation systems—not as a product of indigenous innovation, but rather as a result of the push of donors, the fall-out from post-election violence, or as part of the quest for international recognition. The KIEMS deployed in Kenya in 2017 was in line with externally funded Kriegler Report (post-2007/08 elections violence) (Independent Review Commission, 2008), EU suggestions, and was technically supported by IDEAS, IFES and UNDP (Ogutu, et al., 2023). Nigeria's 2023 introduction of the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) also enjoyed a modernization story legitimating support from donors, but could not prevent integrity problems. These are instances of the fundamental lesson that diffusion theory has to offer: technological adoption does not mean democratic improvement. But that’s not what the research primarily showcases; rather, the results more commonly expose a chasm between what people project onto reform and how it actually works, driving us to question not only the content of reforms, but what purposes such content serves and what it produces. This advances a more nuanced analysis beyond the techno-optimism toward a more substantial engagement with the politics and political economy of electoral governance in the Global South.

### 2.2 Empirical Review

The empirical review conducted here examines literature in two sub-themes relevant for pursuing the present study’s analysis to verify its thesis. These themes are the subject of electoral governance and its necessity, pointing out the death of research that link governance discourses to ICT or digital discourses. The second sub-theme examines the literature on positive framing of ICT elections, ICT as value addition, particularly examining the normative and economic and rationalizations. The critical review undertaken is useful to the study insofar as it aids in analyzing the extent to which the gap in finding a nexus between the wave of digital electoralism and governance in the specific domain of elections continue to facilitate a scholarship that is uncritical about ICT integration in Africa’s electoral governance, seeing it, as a tool that can usher in electoral integrity.

#### 2.2.1 Electoral Governance; a Critical Governance Domain in Africa

Considered in the broadest terms, governance describes the mechanisms, structures, and customs through which power is wielded and public life is coordinated. According to UNDP (1997) governance is the process by which authorities with economic, political and administrative authority direct a country’s affairs at levels by serving their citizens through effectiveness and efficiency. It involves the means whereby citizens project their interests, moderate their differences and assert demands upon their representatives. Theorists such as Pierre & Peters (2000) and Hyden et al. (2004) emphasize that good governance is not only the availability of institutions, but, rather, how power is deployed—transparently, responsively, and in a manner conducive to the public good. Within the wide scope of this field, electoral governance is one such important subsection. It is the set of formal procedural or institutional



arrangements behind the choice of political representatives, the legitimacy they receive and the renewal of leadership over time.

As an independent segment of governance, electoral governance is the body of laws and regulations, institutional arrangements, and administrative procedures designed to safeguard the integrity and legitimacy of the electoral process. Electoral governance according to the United Nations (2005) "encompasses all the activities which relate to the organization, management and supervision of the electoral process, including the legal and institutional framework, the system of electoral law and the roles of the actors involved in the administration of elections including the electoral management body, political parties, the judiciary, civil society and the media." Academic definitions of Electoral Management Bodies (EMBs) highlight not only the formal, but also the norms and practices of authority and inclusiveness, within electoral systems. Electoral Authoritarianism" according to Mozaffar & Schedler (2002) is the mechanism of creating and enforcing the rules of electoral competition in place, and thus controlling who can vote, how votes can be cast and counted, and how conflicts over the election's outcome are resolved. In turn, Norris (2014) disaggregates electoral governance into three inter-related dimensions: electoral rules (legal-institutional design), electoral administration (operation and oversight), and electoral integrity (normative commitment to democratic standards). These are encouraging signs that bode well for open, inclusive, credible and legitimate elections that will produce responsive leadership." Electoral management therefore is not simply a procedural consideration, but also an institution which represents a cornerstone of democratic legitimacy and political order.

The importance of electoral management in Africa is influenced in three mutually reinforcing ways. The continent's most chronic crisis, in other words, isn't a lack of policy or institutions but a shortage of leadership. As Leftwich (2010) and Mkandawire (2001) suggest, the deficit of such transformational leadership has continued to stunt developmental paths in the continent. If competently conducted, elections provide organized leadership turnover and renewal. They also offer Africa its best hope to identify, legitimize and enable leaders who are dedicated to inclusive development and responsive government. But this is where Africa draws the line. The top leadership of the EMBs are composed of clients of political patrons who instead of working to deliver electoral integrity adhere to the dictates of informal negotiations between them and their patrons, who to begin with put them on those leadership positions. It is very worrying for example, that Kenya has elections in 2027, but the electoral body is yet to be fully constituted, and there are widespread de-legitimation from the opposition coalition that the chairpersons and all the commissioners are allied to the president. Second, governance of the elections is important because it serves as a tool to resolve conflicts peacefully. In areas with ethnic divides and historical grievances, where institutions are weak, elections are likely—if and when they are seen as free and fair—to turn plausible political contention into liberal democratic rivalry as opposed to violent struggle (Diamond, 2008; Lindberg, 2006). Third, routine electoral activities help to empower citizens and socialize them into democracy and to build confidence in state institutions and increase political participation, particularly among the youth and marginalized (Bratton, 2013; Cheeseman, 2015). Elections therefore act not only as the mechanisms by which we select leaders, but as well as a critical time for public action and democratic rejuvenation.

The urgent necessity of robust electoral governance is very clear from the case studies of Kenya and Nigeria. But both, despite their strategic significance in Africa -- Kenya as an East African powerhouse; Nigeria as a major continental player -- have a lot of work to do when it comes to electoral integrity, and the credibility and legitimacy of their leadership. For example, on a couple of occasions, election observers from the African Union (AU), International Conference on the Great Lakes Region (ICGLR), and the European Union (EU) have raised concerns over transparency and credibility of the elections, especially after the 2007/8 post-election violence, and the 2017 election in Kenya (AU, 2007; EU, 2017). The reports suggest that systemic flaws – such as voter intimidation, electoral boundary manipulation and weak voter registration systems – have undercut public confidence in the electoral process and in the legitimacy of those who lead. These challenges are compounded by Kenyan's historical issues with the role of ethnicity and that of its relationship with the state in political governance, where elections have, itself, been viewed as a negative-sum competition (i.e., if I win, then you must lose) – hence, the need for credible electoral governance has also become one catalyst towards (political) peace, reconciliation and even the retention of social and political stability in the country.

Indeed, Nigeria's electoral process has been dogged by inherent challenges of vote buying, rigging, and administrative failures. Reportedly, the 2019 Nigerian elections were also characterized by logistical problems and delays and violence, leading to widespread discontent among the citizens over the way the elections were conducted (EU EOM, 2019). While the electoral process was redesigned over the years to modernize it, by introducing the biometric system for registration of voters and use of electronic voting machines among others, irregularities and distrust of the system persist. As pointed out by Omotola (2010), these junctures emphasize the imperative of addressing fundamental reforms in electoral administration that lead to a process that is transparent, accountable, and instills confidence of the public in the process of selection of leadership.



Yet the governance literature on Africa, though extensive, generally addresses elections and electoral technology as essentially technical or administrative problems, without reference to underlying political and institutional significance. Most of the analysis focuses on election results, voter behaviour, or institutional innovations, however, without linking these to the wider governance agenda. Particularly, there is inadequate research on the interface between ICT-based electoral reforms, governance dividends and legitimacy of leadership. This is a large gap with the increasing use of technology in electoral processes, from biometric registration to electronic transmission of results, and its potential to support or undermine public confidence in governance processes. By questioning the political rationalities, claims and constraints of ICT-led electoral systems in countries such as Kenya and Nigeria, this research helps to fill this analytical void. It reconceptualises electoral technology not just as an electoral tool to be used for election administration, but a governance technology that has deep consequences for accountability, legitimacy, and the quality of democratic leadership in Africa.

### 2.2.2 ICT as A Value Addition in Electoral Governance – Normative and Economic Arguments

The process of electoral digitalization in Africa has picked up steam in the past two decades due to the ever-increasing demand for verifiable and transparent yet cost-effective electoral systems. Underlying this evolution is the introduction of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), which have been portrayed not only as instruments of democratic deepening but also as devices for enhancing administrative effectiveness. In countries such as Kenya and Nigeria where elections have been synonymous with high-stake political competition and accusations of constant tampering with laid out procedures, ICT has been considered as a value add to electoral governance. These technological changes can be justified, according to two complementary frameworks: normative claims based on conceptions of democratic legitimacy, and economic claims that endorse efficiency and accountability.

At the normative level, the introduction of ICTs into electoral governance is underpinned by a desire to improve electoral integrity and rebuild citizens' confidence in democratic institutions. According to academics – see Schedler (2002) – in order to be considered as ensuring electoral integrity, elections must not be rigged at any stage – from registration to transmission of results. In Kenya and Nigeria, for example, there have been allegations of electoral frauds multiple registrations, ghost voting, lack of transparency in the canvass of results that have put into question the integrity of the elections. BVR, electronic voter identification and digital result transmissions systems were not mundane devices meant to produce a technocratic spectacle – they were a governance response to political and institutional failure. In Kenya, the Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission (IEBC) implemented BVR technology in the 2013 general elections, spurred in large part by the later violently disputed 2007 polls that highlighted significant weaknesses in the manual voter register and vote-counting process (EU EOM, 2013; Cheeseman et al., 2020). Nigeria's Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), for example, in 2015, introduced the Smart Card Reader to verify the identity of voters and reduce the incidence of ballot box stuffing and impersonation, which were features of previous elections (Omotola, 2010; INEC, 2015).

Further, transparency as a fundamental democratic value is one of the normative groundings for adopting ICT. Procedural transparency is crucial for electoral legitimacy, especially in situations of intense political competition where electoral participation is framed in relation to inter-ethnic or inter-regional competition (Norris, 2014). The use of the Kenya Integrated Elections Management System (KIEMS) in Kenya and the use of the INEC Result Viewing Portal (IREV) in Nigeria are cases in point on attempts to institutionalize transparency through real time digital transmission. These systems were intended to minimise the use of results: a practice previously condemned for enabling result tampering at the collation centres and tallying stations. But transparency must be more than a technical accomplishment; it's a political imperative. In settings characterised by a climate of distrust and historical marginalization, such as the North-South political dynamics in Nigeria or Kenya's elections where voting behavior is often ethnicised, the transparency of digital processes may reassure the electorate that the electoral process is trustworthy and transparent (BBC Africa Eye, 2023; African Arguments, 2023).

ICTs also play a role in democratic socialization by increasing citizen participation and information availability. Platforms like Facebook and WhatsApp provide novel tools through which to educate, engage, and turn out voters, particularly in an African context where so much of the population is youth, and access to the internet is expanding exponentially. Solutions like SMS-based voter information services, interactive voter registration solutions, and mobile-based result dissemination platforms perform duties that reach beyond logistics, acting also as instruments for civic education. They demystify voting and encourage a participative political culture. Lindberg (2006) and Bratton (2013) insists that repeated exposure to electoral events reinforces democratic behaviour for the long term. In Kenya, as well as Nigeria, civic tech platforms have been established as key intermediaries between electoral commissions and citizens, and helped to promote greater integrity and participation, particularly among urban youth (Mutunga 2022; Olorunmola, 2017).

Apart from the prescribed benefits, the economic argument for ICTs in elections is becoming more apparent. One of the more immediate benefits is administrative ease. Digital systems help simplify election logistics by cutting



down on paperwork, human errors, and the time spent counting ballots. Biometric voter registration, for instance, removes multiple entries and ensures faster and more accurate voter register consolidation. Transmission of results electronically saves time and money, not to mention the risk entailed in a manual delivery of paper forms over miles of open or difficult terrain. For example, in Nigeria, the deployment of Smart Card Readers in the 2015 elections led to improved timely result collation and an overall more efficient electoral process than previous elections that were characterized by logistics-related setbacks (INEC 2015). Kenya's KIEMS kits were, however, intended to serve similar functions, but technical failures during the 2017 elections led to questions around their reliability and preparation (IEBC, 2013; 2017; 2018; 2022; AfriCOG, 2018).

In addition, the significant initial investments made in ICT infrastructure are frequently rewarded with long-term cost-saving and operational benefits. Digital can be seen as a logic of the fiscal in that, as Gelb & Diofasi (2016: 1863) argue, 'The appeal of digital systems for GO1 [...is] the promise that it [digital] will help identify fraud, lower costs and increase the precision of planning'. In Kenya the expenditure on biometric/ computer systems is frequently legitimated not only in terms of the need for administrative reform but also in the name of the management of political risk — a device aimed at forestalling the economic and human costs of post-election violence (Kanyinga & Long, 2012). In the same vein, the Nigerian election management body has underscored the cost-benefit rationale of its five-year strategic plan (2022–2026), and ported ICT as a tool to drive down costs related to physical logistics, security commitment, and voter turnout.

Also, increased ability to manage data and analyse data for evidence-informed decision-making due to the use of ICTs is critical. Centralised electronic voter registers enable electoral management organizations to disaggregate demographic information, track voter registration trends, and gauge electoral participation on a scale that is more accurate compared to paper-based systems. These capabilities enable focused voter education, straight-sided resource distribution and reactive election-day logistics. Cheeseman et al. (2020) argue that through data-driven planning, electoral preparedness as risk management strategy can be improved, and institutions can better forecast and address challenges. It is particularly important in countries with large, widely spread populations and complex political geographies, like Nigeria and Kenya.

Despite the numerous benefits, the adoption of ICTs in electoral management also comes with challenges. Skeptics, meanwhile, caution that technical reforms miss the forest through the trees because they might hijack or ill-executed, end-up damaging, rather than reinforcing, democratic institutions. Similarly, in Kenya, the digital transmission of the electoral result was called into a question by the Supreme Court when it nullified the 2017 presidential election thereby unearthing the fact that the legitimacy of electronic technologies in electoral processes heavily rely on the people who operate it (Kenya Supreme Court, 2017). IReV The IReV did not live up to its billing in Nigeria, where the real-time result transmission which was highly anticipated for the 2023 general election disappointed the public, as numerous glitches, slow uploads added impetus to claims of rigging and establishment bias (The Conversation Africa, 2023). Indeed, all of these experiences demonstrate that technology in itself will not ensure electoral legitimacy. And it has to sit in a context of political accountability, legal clarity and institutional transparency. As Mozaffar and Schedler (2002: 25–27) insightfully observe, technology may reduce some types of electoral malpractice, but it can also open up new opportunities for elite struggle and tactical maneuvering.

As this sub-section analysis has shown the digitization of electoral governance in Kenya and Nigeria is motivated by a mix of normative and economic rationales. Firstly, on the one hand ICT can restore public faith and confidence, create transparency and encourage democratic participation. On the other hand, it guarantees efficiency, saving and better institutional capacity for concurrently the planning and the execution aspects. It is these reasons that ICT is an explicit tool in the wider search for democratic consolidation in Africa. The effectiveness of such technologies, however, ultimately lies in the political will to maintain electoral integrity and the institutional capacity to reform openly (Cheeseman, et al., 2020). In this way, ICT is far more than just a collection of technologies and technical processes – it is a form of governance intervention with far-reaching ramification for how elections are held, how legitimacy is established, and how democracy is perceived by citizens. In that sense, the story of electoral digitization in Kenya and Nigeria is not simply one of technology; it is of the very meaning and practice of democracy.

### III. METHODOLOGY

This article is grounded on governance studies within political science and attempts to link ICT-based elections to governance problems Africa's faces. Especially based on the fact that ICT is increasingly seen as a solution to electoral malpractices overwhelming Africa since independence. The study is based on qualitative interpretivism informed by secondary data and critical literature review to investigate the promises, politics and pitfalls of ICT based electoral reforms in Africa. The study makes use of Kenya and Nigeria as orientating signposts, using these East and West African regional powers who have grappled with the global trend towards digitized



elections as case studies. Kenya becomes the world's first country to have its election overturned by a court, this paradoxically occurring at a time that it has just rolled out perhaps the most sophisticated ICT elections management gadget, the Kenya Integrated Election Management System (KIEMS), and as Nigeria recently embraced for the first time, the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS), both provide an anchorage to interrogate the political rationality, global influences, and legitimacy conundrums of the politics of transfer of electoral technology in the continent.

The data that was used in this study are drawn from various secondary sources such as official government reports (especially those from electoral management bodies – Kenya's Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission (IEBC) and Nigeria's Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC); peer-reviewed scholarly articles on the subject of African electoral governance; official statements and reports of international and regional election observation missions (EU EOM, African Union, ECOWAS), think tank such as Afrobarometer and donor agency publications (especially EU Elections Observer Missions – EU EOMs), and reputable national and international media reporting. These materials were analysed closely for common narratives, claims, contradictions, and outcomes connected to ICT-based electoral reform. The analysis is informed by Policy Diffusion Theory and focuses on mechanisms such as normative emulation, donor conditionalities and the symbolic power of modernization. This made it possible to peep through how electoral technologies are not only mere technical instruments, but political signals that often camouflage unsettled governance deficits in African electoral politics.

## IV. FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

### 4.1 Findings: From Norms and Economics to Practice

As previously noted in the sub-sections above, it is evident that the increasing application of ICT in African electoral cycles, in particular biometric registration, electronic voting identification and digital results transmission, represents a paradigm shift in how states conceptualize and perform electoral governance. But this change is neither happening in a vacuum. Instead, it shows the overall process of diffusion through which global electoral norms — emphasis on efficiency, transparency and credibility — intersect with domestic governance imperatives and political logics. There is a growing international focus on legitimate elections, led by the international development partners, regional electoral observation missions, and intergovernmental agencies, which is fueling technological innovation. Yet in order to argue that ICT-based electoral reforms are essentially a case of policy diffusion and nothing but endogenous governance reform, it is essential to examine the context specificity and nature of their emergence. Kenya and Nigeria — two of the continent's political big brothers— provide dramatic support for this argument, with their own digital transitions riding in the wake of crises, counsel from international observers and pressure from a public increasingly demanding electoral credibility.

#### 4.1.1. The Kenyan Example: Crisis, Reform and the Birth of KIEMs

Kenya's pursuit of ICT-powered elections followed not a climate of technological optimism, but the crucible of political tumult. The 2007 general election – hailed by many as a turning point in the country's democratic evolution – degenerated into a classic case of post-election violence. Over 1300 were killed, 600,000 people displaced and the fabric of national unity was unquestionably torn apart (Commission of Inquiry into Post-Election Violence [CIPEV], 2008). At the heart of this crisis was the opacity, fraudulence and lack of credibility in the electoral process. Counting votes was plagued by irregularities, opaque manual systems and institutional inadequacies within the now-defunct Electoral Commission of Kenya (ECK). These flaws led to the establishment of the Independent Review Commission, also known as the Kriegler Commission, whose report exposed the flaws in the structures and procedures of Kenyan elections that had persisted for years. One of its main recommendations was the immediate introduction of BVR, electronic voter identification, and electronic results transmission in order to prevent election theft as well as to foster public confidence (Independent Review Commission, 2008).

In reaction, the Kenyan electoral edifice was subjected to substantial institutional and legal overhauls. The IEBC was formed in 2011, replacing the discredited ECK whose performance in the 2007 general elections was heavily criticised. Constitutional mandate The IEBC was established by the Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission Act, 2011 (Acts No.3 of 2011) to undertake the task of preparing, conducting and supervising the 2013 national elections. The Act statutorily directed the Commission to take advantage of relevant technology in the conduct of elections so as to foster transparency, accountability and efficiency. In particular, Section 44 of the Elections Act (2011), which was amended in later years, required the IEBC to use an integrated electronic electoral system including biometric voter registration, electronic voter identification, and electronic transmission of results.

The 2013 General Election was the first countrywide test-bed for these ICT driven changes. Biometric voter registration (BVR) kits were for the first time used to capture a digital voter register and the Results Transmission System (RTS) was implemented to transfer results electronically from polling stations to the national tallying center.



But the election itself was marred by serious operational problems, such as widespread failure of BVR kits, and breakdown of the RTS platform. Presiding officers in numerous polling stations had to resort to using handwriting in voter verification and results transmission. The IEBC subsequently admitted that poor technical training, hurried procurement and logistical delays (including the late arrival of electronic equipment) had hampered the efficiency of the systems (IEBC, 2013; EU EOM, 2013). As such, though 2013 marked Kenya's formal venture into electoral technology, the challenges highlighted the hiatus between policy ambition and implementation capability.

These lessons paved the way for more institutional and policy changes in the run up to the 2017 elections. At the core of these reforms was the adoption for the first time of the Kenya Integrated Electoral Management System (KIEMS), legitimised by the Elections Act (Use of Technology) Regulations of 2017, which brought together various ICT applications—wipe off confirmation of voter identity, electronic transmission of results, and digital register—under one roof. Embedded under the 2011 Elections Act (amended in 2016), KIEMS was meant to set up an entirely digital elections system. The changes mandated that voters were to be verified electronically and results transmitted in real time directly from polling stations on secure digital platforms (Republic of Kenya, 2017). The acquisition of the KIEMS kits from Safran Identity and Security (later IDEMIA) signalled a departure from ad hoc means of adopting technology to more organized integration of ICT use in managing elections.

Yet this decision was also influenced by external normative pressures. The EU EOM, in both its 2013 and 2017 reports, has made a strong recommendation for the use of technology in order to improve the integrity of the electoral process and address the longstanding problems of ballot stuffing and late-night counting irregularities (EU EOM, 2013; 2017). Such was also the case with the African Union and the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), two institutions that positioned ICT as the sine qua non of good elections (AU, 2017). Civil society alliances such as Kura Yangu Sauti Yangu (My Vote, My Voice) were instrumental in inscribing these world normative agendas in local vernaculars. Not only did these stakeholders advocate digital reforms, but they also offered their independent oversight mechanisms to oversee the way in which ICT is used.

But despite this seeming jump towards modernization, Kenya's history with electronic voting has been anything but uncomplicated. During the General Elections in 2017, several weaknesses of the KIEMS architecture were exposed. Biometric voter identification partly but not completely worked in many parts and digital transmission of presidential results became highly disputed. In a landmark ruling, the Supreme Court of Kenya nullified the presidential election for irregularities and illegalities in the result transmission process, including the use of unsigned forms and inconsistency between hard and soft copy records (Supreme Court of Kenya, 2017). This decision highlighted the political relevance of the electoral technology, and also exposed it to elite capture. Hacking, tampering with systems, and failure to divulge information about servers testified to the limitation of ICT in environments with low degree of institutional trust and political accountability (Odote, 2017; Cheeseman et al., 2019).

Post-2017, the IEBC sought to rebuild confidence through post-election reviews and technical assessments. Yet come the 2022 general elections, concerns persisted. There were widespread reports by observers, including the EU EOM and Kenya's own ELOG, of long delays in uploading results, malfunctioning of KIEMS kits in rural areas, and unclarity in accessing servers to inspect for verification (EU EOM, 2022). What is more, these elections were marred by allegations of political interference again, and prominent members of the political class, who were accused of abusing technological processes to interfere in the outcome. As in 2017, the defeated candidate called the results into question before the Supreme Court, throwing into question – once more – the foundations of the dependability of ICT-based systems in a strongly polarized political environment.

Read together, the story of Kenya's evolution toward ICT-mediated elections signals the potential and perils of digital electoral transformation. On the one hand, technology has brought transparency, efficiency, and avenues for citizen's engagement. On the other, it has emerged as a new battleground of contestation, elite co-optation, and regulatory uncertainty. Instead of eliminating electoral controversies, technology has simply moved them to new battlegrounds — code, servers, transmission logs and digital forms. This implies that the adoption of ICT in Kenya was not simply a homegrown innovation, but a policy diffusion mechanism that was as a result of the urgency of dealing with crisis, normative influence and elite calculations. The Kenyan experience is thus a cautionary one: technology may update election systems, but it cannot replace political will, institutional integrity, and a democratic culture.

#### 4.1.2 The Nigerian Experience

Nigeria's journey into the world of ICT-enabled electoral governance, therefore, represents a slow but contested trajectory influenced by indigenous crisis of legitimacy as well as persistent normative external pressure. The moment of the trigger followed badly rigged and violent 2007 general elections, an affair widely condemned by domestic and international observer missions. The EU EOM (2007) and NDI described the election process as severely flawed and characterised it by widespread ballot stuffing, fictitious results and disenfranchisement. It was in the wake of this second that the Uwais Electro-Reforms Committee, an ad-hoc committee set up after the election by



(late) President Umaru Musa Yar'Adua, who, in his characteristic candour confessed that the process that saw him into power was tainted by malpractice, recommended radical move to introducing a biometric voter register to sanitise the voter register and minimise identity theft (Uwais Electoral Reform Committee, 2008).

The INEC, reconstituted and reformed under Attahiru Jega (2010–2015) started to implement these reforms in practice. The 2011 polls were the first in which biometric voter registration was deployed nation-wide, a significant benchmark in the digitalisation of Nigerian elections. By then, Permanent Voter Card (PVC) had been issued and the trend had continued. By 2015, INEC introduced Smart Card Readers (SCRs): devices utilized for the instant biometric authentication at the polling stations. These innovations were grounded in law especially the Electoral Act of 2010 (as amended) which requires INEC to use technology in voter registration and accreditation. These amendments were praised by the EU EOM (2015), noting diminished multiple voting and increased public trust in particular in areas where the electoral process had been compromised in the past.

Nigeria's digitalization of elections was however not entirely endogenous or insulated from elite contestation. External actors—specifically the USAID, the UK's DFID, and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)—under the Democratic Governance for Development (DGD) project channeled significant resources into INEC's technical competence. They had also given training, equipment and adviser support, thereby shaping Nigeria's policy direction. Bekoe (2017) and Lindberg (2020) write this off as an instance of transnational policy diffusion, through which democratic norms and institutional templates are exogenously transferred across sovereign demarcations through a combination of Donor Conditionality and elite consensus.

The digitisation also created an additional layer of economic and political complication. Digital infrastructure made Nigeria's elections much cost level. It is estimated that the 2015 general elections were funded to the tune of around \$625 million USD, a sharp increase over that used in elections in previous years. Most of this centred on the acquisition of biometric devices, ICT support services, as well as logistics for distribution of PVCs and card readers (INEC, 2022). The 2023 general elections, conducted under the amended Electoral Act of 2022, became even more ICT-intensive. Legally established the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) for verification (biometric and facial) and the electronic; transmission of results from polling units to the INEC Result Viewing Portal (IREV). These reforms were lauded as radical and a step toward transparency.

But the 2023 elections in practice demonstrated a gap between policy designs and political realities. INEC's said it will upload, in real time, result from the various polling units collapsed like a pack of cards, at the presidential tally (Ojo, 2023b). The BVAS devices had selective breakdowns while the IReV architecture had unexplained long delays and inconsistencies, especially in strongholds of the opposition. There were also claims of electronic rigging, hacking, and conspiracies between INEC officials and ruling party members. Peter Obi, candidate of the Labour Party, and Atiku Abubakar of the People's Democratic Party (PDP) filed legal challenges, alleging that INEC committed "electoral banditry in the digital steeplechase of democracy." The Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD, 2023a; 2023b; 2023c; YIAGA Africa, 2023) in their reports published observation findings that indicated that the public's confidence in the process had been significantly eroded, and even the trustworthiness of the ICT infrastructure in use had been thrown into doubt.

The procurement process for the 2023 electoral activity also turned into a battlefield. Civil society monitors expressed concerns over the lack of transparency in the contracting process and allegations of favoritism in the procurement of ICT vendors. The Independent Corrupt Practices and Other Related Offences Commission (ICPC) and media exposure had for instance exposed bloated contracts, ghost suppliers and sundry payments related to BVAS procurement. Elite struggle over digital tools was therefore not just ideological but a struggle for who had control over the logistical, financial and symbolic levers of the electoral process.

In the main, there is legal and institutional progress in Nigeria towards digitalizing electoral governance, but the experience has unveiled a major paradox: electoral governance becomes more complex (increasingly complex), or simply, its modern capacity has not shielded it from elite distortion, operational vulnerability, and public distrust. Instead, the digital turn has opened up new spaces for contestation—over data, devices, procurement, and platforms—without necessarily disrupting the existing informal circuits that corrode electoral integrity. Thus, the Nigerian context serves to illustrate the fact that technology is not the answer without political will, institutional integrity and a culture of accountability.

#### 4.2 Change without Change?

This section summarizes the analyses above and utilizes other data sources to affirm the thesis of this study, namely that in Africa (as evidence from the two case studies) change in reform for the adoption of ICT elections is a by and large change unchanged. As in the earlier sub-sections, the present sub-section also considers the cases one at a time. To justify the thesis being made, this discussion exposes section the two central normative rationalities (used for assessing public trust as per Pew Research Center, 2021)—that ICT increases trust in electoral system and enhances



voter turnout; and one economic justification, namely efficiency – the argument that ICT would help reduce cost of elections.

#### 4.2.1 Kenya

The political scene in Kenya remains representative of the contradictions that frustrated the ICT enabled electoral reform efforts in Sub-Saharan Africa; a formally democratic state with sophisticated legal system alongside deeply entrenched informal power networks which while negates the rule-based system of governance, has become an indispensable component Kenya’s body politic. Since multiparty politics was reintroduced in 1992, electoral processes in Kenya have been fraught with violent competition, ethnic polarization, vote-buying and allegations of rigging. The normative ideal of ICT in elections—raising transparency, credibility, and public confidence—was therefore perceived as an urgent intervention to treat the longstanding legitimacy crisis of electoral governance. However, more than a decade after the introduction of the biometric and digital electoral systems, the change that was expected has only gone halfway and in many other facets, it is a far from reality.

The introduction of KIEMS, and the biometric voter registration systems, were meant to mark the end of the era of analogue anomalies. In normative terms, ICT was intended to ‘sanitize’ the process by bringing auditability, reducing human discretion in result management as well as insulating elections from elite manipulation. Economically, the application of ICT tools was expected to lead to long-term savings generated through efficiencies, reduced litigation costs, and professionalization of the IEBC. But both rationalities — normative and economic — have been systematically subverted by Kenya’s opaque political system, which has adeptly appropriated technology to suit elite interests.

Firstly, in normative terms, the principal indicator of electoral integrity—trust in the accuracy of the electoral process—has improved little. According to a 2019 report from Afrobarometer, just 27% of Kenyans had faith in the electoral commission to tally votes fairly, down from 36% in 2014 (Afrobarometer Round 7 Survey, 2019). What’s more, it was felt tangibly and tragically soon after the presidential elections of 2017, nullified by the Supreme Court on account of “illegalities and irregularities” in the transmission of poll results (Republic of Kenya v. IEBC & Others, 2017). Even though the IEBC had used KIEMS to electronically transmit results and authenticate the identity of voters, the Court observed that the systems had either been hacked or did not work as intended. It was the world's first nullification of a presidential election, and a scathing verdict on the credibility-enhancing capacity of ICTs, in the normative task of transforming elections in politically unreformed terrains like Kenya.

Secondly, in contrast to the widespread normative assumption that ICTs promote political participation by improving the convenience, trust, and effectiveness of voting, Kenya’s experience suggests a less rosy future. Indeed, as a proxy for democratic engagement, voter turnout has fallen over the three general elections held under the ICT mediated framework. In the 2013—the inaugural election conducted with biometric voter registration and partial electronic transmission—turnout was at 85%, driven in part by enthusiasm for the new constitutional dispensation and novelty of digital reform (IEBC, 2013). By 2017, relatively low turnout had fallen to 79%, and was even lower in 2022, down to 65.4% (IEBC, 2017; IEBC, 2022). Significantly, the 2022 figure is the worst national turnout since the return to multiparty democracy in 1992. This decline indicates that public trust and participation do not simply follow the existence of the ICT infrastructure. Instead, what seems to be important is a wider political landscape in which these technologies are embedded. A series of high-profile scandals surrounding the accuracy of digital systems and the security of voting machines, with the impression of elite manipulation of election results, has also contributed. Accordingly, in contexts characterised by distrust in institutions and political capture, digital technologies may indeed contribute towards deepening alienation rather than reversing it—and thus further challenging the global narrative that ICT will promote democratic deepening in the absence of structural political reform.

**Table 1**  
*Voter Turn Out Since 1992 (General Elections and Referendum)*

Year	Percentage Turn Out
1992	69%
1997	68%
2002	57%
2005	68%
2007	67%
2010	72%
2013	85%
2017	79%
2022	65.4%

Source: IEB Website: <https://www.iebc.or.ke/>.



Thirdly, and economically speaking, the financial cost of digitized elections in Kenya has been exorbitant, as opposed to cost effective. The 2013 (General Election) was about USD 230 million, and in the 2017 GE estimated cost was more than USD 480 million, despite generous donor support and previous use of the technology (IEBC, 2018). The 2022 election was estimated to have cost a record USD 370 million – among the most expensive in the world, per capita. Part of the reason for these skyrocketing costs is excessive procurement procedures, non-competitive tenders, and eleventh-hour technology deployment, which has been witnessed throughout Kenya’s ICT-elections era (2013 – to date) (Odote & Kanyinga, 2021; AfriCOG, 2013; Okong’o & Matatu, 2017; Al Jazeera, 2013). For example, the 2017 acquisition of KIEMS kits from Safran OT-Morpho, a French digital security company (now known as IDEMIA) was fraught with legal disputes and a lack of transparency (Okong’o & Matatu, 2017). Parliamentarians and watchdog organizations, including the Auditor General, criticized the procurement for being too expensive and not thoroughly tested (Office of the Auditor General, 2019). Moreover, as Odote & Kanyinga (2021) assert, these issues were raised earlier by opposition leaders and other non-governmental actors, but a deaf ear was paid leading to the nullification of the elections, and a further election, consequently further draining the public coffers in an endless elections’ mood.

As a matter of politics, these technology platforms have been another field of struggle and elite appropriation. Dominant political players have been habitual deceivers in the narratives — as well as the actual wiring — of electoral technology. The IEBC was accused by opposition leader Raila Odinga in 2017 of overseeing a “computer-generated election” after the mysterious murder days before the polls of ICT manager Chris Msando—an episode that left serious doubts about the integrity of the digital infrastructure. This tragedy served as a reminder that rather than being politically neutralizing, technology might instead be complicit in or vulnerable to political elite warfare.

In addition, Kenya’s inability to hold free, fair, and credible party primaries is evidence of the untenability of the promises of digital election (National Cohesion and Integration Commission [NCIC], 2022; Odote & Kanyinga, 2021). Moreover, the manipulation of voter registration numbers—routinely inflated and gerrymandered on ethnopolitical lines—also exposes the shortcomings of digital devices in a context of the pervasive power of informal political logics that already has ghost numbers that the digital platform is expected to arrive. As Cheeseman et al. (2019) argue, “The problem in Kenya is not so much the type of the elections as the nature of the political settlement, which incentivises the control of the state rather democratic accountability.”

In the end, the experience of Kenya reveals that the layers of technical capacity that ICT adds to elections do not transform the political culture of embedded electoral manipulation, nor do they bring the normative and economic promises that are attached to digitized elections in global policy discourse. The spread of e-electoral technology in Kenya can be depicted as a timely, albeit too hasty, policy adoption that has been informed by both internal pressures of reform and external global governance expectations, but not sufficiently rooted in a supportive political context. If anything, technology has not eliminated the question of electoral credibility; it has only reconfigured the battlefield on which Kenya’s elite fight for power.

#### 4.2.2 Nigeria

In Nigeria, the pursuit of electoral legitimacy through ICT-enabled reforms has unfolded within a complex and often hostile political terrain which is marked by elite manipulation, fragmented institutional accountability, and persistent public mistrust (National Democratic Institute, 2007; Sargsyan, 2016; Onapajo & Babalola, 2021). The gradual adoption of digital technologies by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) since the widely discredited 2007 elections was not merely a technical or administrative evolution; it emerged as a normative response to both domestic and international condemnation of systemic fraud, ballot stuffing, and result falsification. What followed was a cautious, incremental digitization strategy that reflected not only the state’s attempt to recapture public trust (Kerr, 2024) but also the strategic cooptation of global governance norms advocating for technology as a panacea to electoral dysfunction (EU EOM, 2023).

Between 2011 and 2015, under the reformist leadership of Prof. Attahiru Jega, Nigeria witnessed notable technological innovations. Biometric voter registration was introduced to prevent impersonation and multiple voting, while the issuance of Permanent Voter Cards (PVCs) and the deployment of Smart Card Readers (SCRs) aimed to standardize and authenticate voter accreditation. These reforms were widely praised for their symbolic break with past manipulation, particularly during the 2015 general elections which led to the historic defeat of an incumbent president—an outcome that many saw as validation of the reforms. The EU Election Observation Mission (EU EOM, 2015 & EU EOM, 2023) both noted that these innovations enhanced procedural transparency and reduced some forms of malpractice. However, as we illustrate below, when we measure Nigerian post-ICT election on the scale of normative and economic rationales, we realize that while these technologies appeared to recalibrate aspects of electoral credibility, they did not displace entrenched patterns of elite contestation. Instead, digital elections became another frontier of political struggle, increasingly marked by regional asymmetries, bureaucratic sabotage, and competing narratives about credibility (Sargsyan, 2016; Onapajo & Babalola, 2021).



First, the normative promises of ICT particularly those emphasizing transparency, citizen trust, and procedural fairness continue to remain, by and large, a mirage in Nigeria. The 2022 Electoral Act provided INEC with the legal mandate to transmit results electronically and implement the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) for both facial and fingerprint recognition. Yet the 2023 general elections quickly revealed the fragility of these reforms. While BVAS functioned relatively well in accrediting voters at the polling units, the failure to consistently upload results in real-time to the INEC Results Viewing Portal (IREV) during the presidential tally seriously undermined public confidence. Unverified claims of funny cases of elections website of Nigeria, having photos of politicians' girlfriends, events that went viral, further cast doubts on whether African giant, Nigeria, is ripe for ICT elections. Civil society organizations and international observers alike criticized the Commission for failing to adhere to its own guidelines, raising suspicions of internal interference or elite capture (Centre for Democracy and Development, 2023). Further, just like Kenya scenarios since 2013, the ensuing legal challenges mounted by opposition figures such as Peter Obi and Atiku Abubakar drew on digital footprints and transmission inconsistencies to allege manipulation. These further fueled public skepticism about whether ICT reforms had delivered on their normative promise.

Secondly, we can assess whether ICT elections are transforming Nigerian election on the grounds of voter turnout. This study finds that despite the widespread belief that ICT integration enhances civic engagement and voter participation, Nigeria's electoral data suggests a persistent and troubling trend of declining turnout, particularly in the digital era. Historically, the country's voter turnout has fluctuated, but the overall trajectory has been downward. In the early years of multiparty elections, turnout was relatively high—69% in 2003 and 57.5% in 2007—despite widespread reports of malpractice and fraud (INEC, 2003; 2007). However, the introduction of biometric voter registration and smart card readers during the 2011 and 2015 elections did not stem the tide of voter apathy. Turnout fell to 53.7% in 2011 and further to 43.7% in 2015, even as INEC and its international partners hailed the innovations as transformative (EU EOM, 2015; Bekoe, 2017). The 2019 elections continued this pattern with a turnout of only 34.75%, one of the lowest in Africa for a general election (INEC, 2019). Most recently, the 2023 elections—despite being heralded as the most technologically advanced due to the deployment of BVAS and IREV—recorded an abysmal turnout of just 27% (Centre for Democracy and Development, 2023). These figures not only challenge the optimism of ICT as a tool for democratic revitalization but also highlight the extent to which political disillusionment, institutional opacity, and elite interference negate any gains from digital innovation. Rather than catalyze mass engagement, the digital turn in Nigeria appears to have coincided with deepening public skepticism, especially among young and first-time voters who have increasingly questioned the sincerity of electoral reforms. As such, Nigeria's experience underscores a fundamental paradox: in a context where political trust is brittle, the mere presence of technology may signal reform without meaningfully shifting the participatory landscape.

Thirdly, beyond performance concerns, the economic rationale for digitizing elections in Nigeria also confirm the thesis of change without change through lens of Nigerian ICT-based elections. The financial costs associated with ICT-based elections have escalated dramatically. The 2019 general elections cost approximately ₦189 billion (around USD 523 million), while the 2023 elections soared to ₦305 billion (USD 662 million), making them among the most expensive in Africa (INEC, 2022; 2023). This massive expenditure, justified as necessary to ensure credible polls, covered the procurement of tens of thousands of BVAS machines, backend server infrastructure, digital training for election staff, cybersecurity frameworks, and widespread voter education campaigns. Yet the return on this investment remains highly contested. While a significant portion of funding came from external donors such as United States Agency for International Development (USAID), UNDP, and the European Union, questions about value-for-money, duplication, and long-term sustainability persist. Based on these events, the paper joins other critics to argue that the digital turn has merely created new avenues for procurement-related corruption, with several investigative reports pointing to opaque tendering processes, the use of middlemen, and the political affiliations of contractors entrusted with supplying election technology (Bekoe, 2017).

Indeed, ICT procurement in Nigeria's elections has itself become a site of elite contestation. The centralization of these contracts and their frequent lack of transparency invite questions about whether digitization is simply reinforcing rent-seeking behavior under the guise of reform. Although INEC retains legal autonomy, the Executive's control over budgetary allocations—approved through the National Assembly—means that political leverage can still be exercised over the Commission's operational independence. In several instances, civil society organizations have flagged the delayed release of funds for ICT procurement as an intentional bottleneck engineered to frustrate early deployment and testing of digital infrastructure. These dynamics illustrate the limits of technological interventions in contexts where institutional power is still subject to informal political pressures and selective compliance.

At a broader level, Nigeria's experience reflects the asymmetric influence of global governance frameworks in shaping domestic reform trajectories. The role of international development partners—USAID, DFID, IFES, and the UNDP's Democratic Governance for Development (DGD) project—has been instrumental not only in funding but also in norm-setting, often embedding a technocratic logic into Nigeria's electoral planning cycles. This paper



therefore confirms assertions by scholars like Adebayo (2020), noting that such top-down policy diffusion frequently fails to contend with the “illicit logics of power” that define political competition in fragile democracies. The normative claim that ICT automatically enhances electoral integrity often overlooks the structural pathologies of the Nigerian state—particularly the personalization of power, regional polarization, and the weakness of judicial oversight mechanisms. Thus, Nigeria’s digital transition does not invalidate the normative or economic rationales for ICT elections, but it does expose their fragile foundations in contexts of elite impunity and institutional weakness. The Nigerian case, like Kenya’s, reaffirms the central thesis that ICT-based electoral reform, while necessary, constitutes a premature policy diffusion when pursued in environments where illicit politics remain untransformed.

## V. CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

### 5.1 Conclusion

This paper sought to examine normative and empirical argumentations on the deployment of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) towards electoral governance in Africa, with particular reference to Kenya and Nigeria. Utilizing the Policy Diffusion Theory, the paper deconstructed the political economy of ICT adaption and the level to which ICT adoption in an emerging democracy were driven by the interest of foreign actors and global normative pressures in determining the trajectory of electoral reforms. The main conclusion of this paper is that, despite its transformational prospects, ICT has by no means depoliticised, or rather legalized elections in Africa, rather, it has reconfigured the sand-box of political competition. Far from dismantling the culture of “do-or-die” that characterises many African elections, ICT has emerged as the new battleground on which elites fight for an edge. Where once considerations focused on ballot stuffing and the integrity of manual vote counts, debates have turned to who manages procurement, who wins the tenders for lucrative elections-related ICT contracts, what technology is used and by whom, and who defines and when, how these digital metrics go on to confer (or challenge) electoral legitimacy. In this way, ICT has not resolved the crisis of credibility in African electoral governance; it has digitized it. Three conclusions flow from this central conclusion.

One clear conclusion is that the introduction of ICT in these countries has been characterized not so much by the evolution of local institutional processes or by domestic civil pressure, but rather as a case of policy diffusion driven by outside factors. This is not necessarily bad diffusion, but it is deeply flawed in situations like those described above, whereby technology is grafted on to weak or unreformed political systems.

Second, given that IT offers normative gains in theory (increased transparency, better identification of voters and faster transmission of results), results from Kenya and Nigeria point to a lopsided relationship between those expectations and what the data shows. In both these regards, electoral technologies have succumbed to elite manipulation, institutional fragility and operational deficiencies. "These shortcomings have not only eroded the credibility of electoral results; they have also led to a loss of confidence in the process and low voter turnout. For instance, voter turnout in Kenya has fallen steeply in the age of digital technology, even as Nigeria’s current 2023 election—the highest technologized so far—fell to only 27%, the lowest in the country’s post-democratization period.

Third, the economic case for ICT-induced reforms (efficiency and cost-effectiveness) has also proven to be unfounded. Rather than resulting in long-term savings or strong institutions, the reforms have triggered bulging costs, lack of transparency in contracting, and increased corruption risks. Both countries’ electoral management bodies have suffered bloated budgets, donor dependency and weak or non-existent accountability mechanisms. What results is a distorted digital turn in African electoral politics—where nebulous forms of technology more often conceal rather than address the structural challenges of election administration. To conclude, Africa’s use of ICT in electoral governance has been a classic instance of ‘premature policy leap-frogging’—an aspirational bid for modernisation that precedes or bypasses the needed infrastructure and processes for sustainable democratic advancement.

### 5.2 Recommendations

Five key recommendations flow from these conclusions.

First, there is need for African countries to anchor ICT Reforms in Domestic Democratic Consultations. Rather than relying on donor-driven blueprints, perpetuated through their mechanism of Elections Observation Missions (EOMs), and the non-strategic use of chaotic electoral events like the Kenya’s 2007/08 post elections violence (which donors usually take advantage of; African countries should ensure that ICT reforms are demand-driven, grounded in local realities, and informed by participatory consultations with voters, civil society, political parties, and media actors. Reforms must be seen as part of a broader national conversation on electoral justice, not as technocratic shortcuts to legitimacy.

Second, African countries should Institute Domestic Financing of Elections to Curb Donor-Driven Policy Diffusion. African governments should commit to funding their own elections—like India, where the Election



Commission is fully state-funded and independent (International IDEA, 2014). This should not be very difficult because it aligns with the 2006 Accra Resolution of the Association of African Electoral Authorities (AAEA), which recommends that external donor funding should not exceed 10% of electoral budgets. Implementing this resolution would reduce donor-induced policy diffusion and allow Electoral Management Bodies (EMBs) to adopt ICT reforms suited to African political contexts.

Third, African countries must institutionalize Independent and Transparent ICT Procurement Processes - National electoral management bodies (EMBs) must develop legally binding, transparent frameworks that insulate the procurement of electoral technologies from political interference. This can include independent audit trails, electoral watch-dogs, for example for public tendering processes, and mandatory public disclosures of supplier affiliations. Such reforms will be very crucial in addressing elite capture and rent-seeking behaviors that currently undermine the integrity of electoral ICT systems.

Fourth, African countries must Invest in Institutional Capacity and Technical Competence of EMBs. There is an urgent need to strengthen the technical, legal, and administrative capacity of electoral commissions. This entails a readiness for governments to nominate the qualified and non-client Chairpersons of the EMBs. As evidence show, the heads of EMBs are the politically correct fellows who have a history with incumbent presidents. Such people, have no interest for integrity but to serve their masters. This is the thin but key way out to heaven of electoral integrity. Other capacity building to be bolstered are professional training, robust ICT support departments, and routine stress-testing of election technologies under simulated conditions. Without institutional readiness, digital systems will continue to fail or be misused, regardless of their sophistication.

Lastly, African countries must establish Regional Peer Review and Knowledge Exchange Mechanisms. A pan-African electoral technology observatory or peer-review platform could be developed, or embedded within the African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM) under the auspices of the African Union or regional economic communities. This would facilitate learning from successful and failed experiences across the continent, promote standard-setting, and enable context-appropriate innovations rather than blind policy diffusion from external actors.

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